

# Performance Studies in Indira Parthasarathy's *Poison Roots*

<sup>[1]</sup>G. Ebenezar Helan, <sup>[2]</sup>Dr. A. Parvathvarthini  
<sup>[1]</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>[2]</sup>Research Supervisor

<sup>[1]</sup><sup>[2]</sup>Aditanar College of Arts and Science, Tiruchendur

helangananaraj06@gmail.com, <sup>[2]</sup> apvarthini@gmail.com

## Abstract

***Poison Roots* by Indira Parthasarathy highlights on the Brahmanical tradition. It also covers social political and religious events like rituals, ceremonies, proclamations and public decisions. The paper tries to uncover the religious and political performances from the novel "Poison Roots". The Protagonist Kesavan scorns symbols of his high caste roots, especially the rather orthodox, autocratic attitude of his father. To overcome the shackles of his conservative Brahmin background, he seeks intellectual interaction with erudite elders as well as a group of young communists in his college.**

**Key Words: tradition, socio political, religious, rituals, high caste roots.**

The present paper attempts to analyze the performance studies in Indira Parthasarathy's novel *Poison Roots*. The term 'performance' is broad. It includes artistic and aesthetic performances like concerts, theatrical events, and performance art. It also covers social political and religious events like rituals, ceremonies, proclamations and public decisions. The paper tries to uncover the religious and political performances from the novel "Poison Roots".

The novel is about young Kesavan who is a college student, critic of traditional religious practices. He scorns symbols of his high caste roots, especially the rather orthodox, autocratic attitude of his father. To overcome the shackles of his conservative Brahmin background, he seeks intellectual interaction with erudite elders as well as a group of young communists in his college. The novel gives a vivid portrayal of Brahminical as well as the communist performances. The novel starts with the day of Thiruvonam. "Thiruvonam is believed to be the Nakshatra of Lord Vishnu who pressed the great king Mahabali to the

underworld with his foot". Kesavan's father recites Thiruppavai inside the puja room. The aroma of sweet, Sakkara Pongal wafts from the kitchen. Kesavan's mother wakes him to take bath. He is forced to wear Poonool. Kesavan stands with folded arms and takes the Prasadam that his father gives him and puts it in his mouth. "Bow down before Perumal, said Appa" (PR 6). Kesavan bends down to touch the ground and puts his hands to his eyes. It is a real picture of how a Brahmin family celebrates or performs Thiruvonam in their houses.

Secondly, the family celebrates Avani Avittam with their neighbours. "Avaniavittam also known as Upakramam meaning beginning or commencement, marks the beginning of study of vedas and is a significant ritual for Brahmin community". A group of Brahmins lead by Kesava's father from their Sannidi street to the river Cauvery by walk. For AvaniAvittam it is mandatory that they all walk towards Cauvery river with a Nadaswaram party leading the procession playing the instruments, and those reciting Yajur Veda following, all the men bare-chested, each with a pot and a small-container, silver or copper according to their respective economic status. Some of them are reciting Thirupallanadu spiritedly. Kesavan's father leads the group, chanting Vedic verses. Uppili, one of his neighbour's son walks with him in the front with a silver pot and a tumbler. Instead of Vedic verses, he begins to chant the introductory verses of Thirupallanadu, the celebrated work of Alwar. "Gurumukhamandeeya Praahavedana Seshaan Narapathi Parikluptham Sulkamadanu Kama..." (43). Mahatma Gandhi says "Prayer is the beginning of the morning and the bolt of the evening". Kesavan's father believes in these words. So he leads the group on the day of AvaniAvittam. From this portrayal readers may understand the rituals of AvaniAvittam.

Thirdly, Indira Parthasarathy makes the reader aware of how a Brahmin family faces death anniversary through Kesavan's grandfather's death anniversary. Kesavan's father takes bath and asks his son to take bath and chant Gayathri Mantra. The whole family have to eat the ritual meal especially Kesavan's grandfather's favourites. They believe that if they eat the death people's favourites they will be happy. Kesavan thinks that "If thatha's soul is to be made happy, he must eat onion sambar" (PR 71). Kesavan visits a hotel on his grandfather's death anniversary. He sits for a regular meal there. The hotel owner asks,

Aren't you Nadathur Iyengar's son? A ceremony in your house? Look here thambi, you are a Brahmin boy, a very daring, perhaps. I cannot even imagine doing what you are doing now. I go to the races, I drink, I consort with prostitutes, but I will not disobey the conventions of my community like you.

If ever my father saw me coming to a hotel on the day of a death ceremony, I would be thrashed with black and blue (PR 73).

From the above lines, one can understand that the society performs the rituals as well as considers the rules are greater than doing sins such as participating race, consuming drinks, involving in prostitution. The family members must be in the house and eat the ritual meal if they like or not and some of their neighbours are supposed to be asked to eat the ritual meal. After they finish their lunch, they are used to put betel leaves and nuts. Next Indira Parthasarathy portrays that a Brahmin man's cremation through Kesavan's uncle's death. The first thing is to be noticed that Kesavan's father says, "We cannot have our bath until the man is cremated" (PR 83). Brahmins never have bath if anybody is died in their community. Kesavan's uncle is childless. Kesavan is referred to do all the activities of his uncle's funeral rituals. His uncle's body is in the hall of his house. It is discovered that there is no poonool on his uncle. Kesavan remembers the poonool on his uncle whenever he visits his house. Perhaps the man is in the habit of donning the sacred thread off and on when it suits him, thinks Kesavan. "This is a sacrilege; there is no poonool on this man's body, A poonool should be on him before we get on with the rites" the neighbours said (PR 85). From this incident, one comes to know that a Brahmin must be cremated with poonool.

Indira Parthasarathy reveals some political performances such as election, public meeting, and strike through Kesavan's college life. Kesavan believes in communism which is one of the political parties. He is compelled to contest in the student union election by his friends. They say that the congress men have their candidate, as do the DMK, they have also to participate. Kesavan is defeated in the election. In addition to the Dravidian Party candidate Kittu from the Student Congress is also a contestant. Kittu has told him before the election, to withdraw. Kittu wins the election. Kesavan analyses Kittu's victory. He finds that "He threw money around lavishly and all his supporters benefitted economically" (24) PR. Finally Kesavan concludes that money wins the election. From this incident Indira Parthasarathy gives a miniature of Indian Politics especially how money wins in the election and how political parties enter into college elections.

Indira Parthasarathy shows a clear picture of a public meeting namely Student Federation Meeting. The conference is to be held in a medium-sized building. It is neither very big nor very small. It has three rooms where the leaders can rest. They have erected a pandal in front of the building. Two hundred chairs are put in there. The building also has a

large central hall. Lunch is arranged to serve there. Kesavan begins his welcome address as soon as the convention is declared open. He speaks against British imperialism. He attacks the world capitalistic tendencies. The crowd breaks out into loud cheers.

Indira Parthasarathy draws the picture of a strike through Kesavan's college life. When he studies M.A., Tamil at Chidambaram, students go on a strike. If the Vice Chancellor will not accept their demands, they have decided to do strike for good food and enough toilet in the hostel. The management stimulates a quarrel among students. Blood is oozing from the corner of a boy's mouth. Many students are with sticks and whatever weapons they could lay their hands upon... chairs without legs, iron rods, and huge stones. Most of the students have shut themselves up in their rooms. Kesavan feels a hard blow fall on him. Through this incident, Indira Parthasarathy depicts the true Indian strike. Finally the paper focuses on social performances. Kesavan is upset and vexed by so many failures in his life. He wants to join in Aurobindo Ashram. They say, "It is not all that easy to become a member of this ashram. All your property... do you have any...? All of it must be made over to the ashram. Are your parents alive? (211) PR. Kesavan stands there silently and thinks that even spirituality ends at a point where material property is! (211) PR. Here readers are reminded of a poem *Money Money Money* which is written by Nathan Strange:

Which came first?

Money or Man?

Yes man! And now money rules man.

Indira Parthasarathy has written this novel in nineties. It is really suited to the present time of India too. The present paper is an analysis of the novel *Poison Roots* in the light of Performance studies as much as possible.

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